The Uneventful Past of the Good Doctor Lecter

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/37206994.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	Gen
Fandoms:	Hannibal (TV), Hannibal Rising (2007), Hannibal Lecter Tetralogy - Thomas Harris
Relationships:	Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter, Alana Bloom/Hannibal Lecter
Characters:	Hannibal Lecter, Jack Crawford, Dr. Frederick Chilton, Beverly Katz, Alana Bloom, Will Graham
Additional Tags:	Canon Compliant, Canonical Character Death, Canon Relationships, Post-Fall (Hannibal), mentions of cannibalism, mentions of murders, Hannibal's past, Past Violence, Past Child Abuse, Mentioned Mischa Lecter, Multiple Points of View, Murder Husbands, No fuck was hurt while being given by Hannibal, 4 + 1, Chilton's Jealousy, It's a character on its own
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of Evil has no roots. But humans love to dig.
Stats:	Published: 2022-02-18 Words: 21,019 Chapters: 1/1

The Uneventful Past of the Good Doctor Lecter

by CestPasDuBaudelaire

Summary

Hannibal was social in societies, but discreet about himself. Everyone knew that much.

Yet, from time to time, it so happened that someone would get a small glimpse of the Good Doctor's life.

Or, from a car ride in the rain to a warm cuban afternoon, 4 times someone stumbled upon a vestige of Hannibal's silenced past, and 1 time he gave it all away.

Notes

Salut les gens !

so the first none smut fanfic I write for this fandom! Which baffles me! I mean, this fandom is just so smutable.

Anyway, I am genuinly obsessed with the trope "Side Character discovers glimpses of Main Character's horrible past". Yet, this trope doesn't work too well for Hannibal for two reasons. 1) Hannibal doesn't have any trauma left, he wouldn't happen to just betray himself, no one can see glimpses of suffering since he is not suffering at all 2) Any glimpse of his past would be an immediate red flag in the context of the show. Like... you can't know the slighest thing about his past and not think that it's impossible for him to be that stable.
Yet, I gave it a go here, because I just love that trope far too much. And it was a way for me to decide a backstory for our favorite Cannibal.

My heads up:
No graphic sexual content. There are mentions of sexual activities, but very superficial ones, suitable for audiences of all ages. I tagged M for the maturity of the themes, the same that can be found in the different canons.
There is a mention of incest, if it's incestuous feelings or incestuous acts, it is left for the reader to decide. Same as in both the book and the movie canons. Once again, nothing explicit, and nothing in depth. But beware if it's a topic that can harm you in any way.
I said canon compliant, but it's compliant with the three canons (book, movie, tv show). I credited them with equal authorities so I had to chose between them from time to time. Everything regarding Hannibal's backstory can be found in either of those oeuvres, except for some filling up, and for the historical recontextualization, though I tried to be as close to the official canons as possible, despite Mads Mikkelsen being far too young for WWII. I detailed in the end note what I took from where.

Mentions of cannibalism and murder. Obvi. But if you're on this fandom, it's another tuesday for you. No graphic description, but direct references.

I am not from Lithuania. I did some research but I can still be wrong about either history or geography.
I am not a native english speaker. I did some rereadings, but mistakes can still be found ahead.

I hope you will enjoy nonetheless!
Don't hesitate to let me know what you thought of it!

See the end of the work for more notes

The Uneventful Past of the Good Doctor Lecter

If someone were to ask him, Hannibal wouldn't say that he was a secret man. A private one, most certainly. It was, after all, common courtesy to not monopolize conversations with matters that only concerned oneself.

Hannibal had never been one to talk about himself, but he was no liar and, most of the time, he didn't really mind if someone happened to learn something about him. There was, after all, nothing to worry about in his past. Nothing to be embarrassed about. So it happened, once or twice, that people had got to see glimpses of it he hadn't meant to show them, but hadn't mind them seeing. It rarely happened. But it happened. Not with Will, though.

No, with Will, it was always different.

I

Contrary to what his record stated, Jack hated to bring outsiders to the field. He trusted each member of his team, but apart from them, not so many. He had called for outside help in the past, but out of absolute necessity, and always in the face of despair.

Myriam Lass had had to carry the weight of his despair to her grave, and that undeniable fact had tremendously tempered with his desire to involve in his life anyone that shouldn't be.

And as for Will…

As for Will, he slept better at night if he didn't dwell on it too much.

Yet, Dr Lecter was a whole new level of uneasiness, for the man, worse than an outsider, was a civilian. One that should have led an entire existence without ever seeing a crime scene. He could tell that the good Doctor had had a privileged life. The highest education, a stable way of life, the attitude of those born in money, the Doctor certainly hadn't experienced a lot of lacking nor shortcoming during his upbringing. He had then dedicated his life to the noble art of healing, first the bodies, then the minds. And sure, he must have witnessed violence both in the ER and in his practice, but nothing like what could be daily seen in the corridors of the headquarter, and behind the shadows under the agents' eyes.

That was the main reason why Jack felt a sting of guilt each time he had to call the Doctor for matters unrelated to Will Graham. At first at least.

For the more he called the man, the less it seemed like an ordeal to do so. As if, day after day, the idea of Hannibal Lecter by his sides didn't seem so foreign nor so worrying anymore. And what he had first done out of necessity, he began to do it out of ease.

Hannibal Lecter was very good. Both in his field of expertise and outside. And, unlike Will, he didn't seem to be easily affected by whatever was thrown at him. On the contrary. Actually, Hannibal was one of the very few people that Jack didn't feel he had to shield from the world. Lecter was a man of balance and health. There was a strange yet reassuring wisdom in his words, and he seemed to be able to keep his discernment and faith in humanity under any circumstances. Jack had wondered several times if it was like that, when one had had a happy and fulfilled life. That structure, that stability, that strength. Not that his own life had been sad and unfulfilled. He was himself a structured, stable, strong man. But there was an ease, an effortlessness to Hannibal that he found rejuvenating.

That alone, and the gradual changes of his point of view concerning the question of outsiders, could explain why it had been so easy to dial the Doctor's number this time.

Doctor Bloom was away for a conference, and the case was being dragged out, setbacks after setbacks. What should have been solved a week ago still wasn't, and maybe Lecter could help. He seemed to be good with children.

The kid was resolutely silent. Her big brown eyes, full of void and shadows, were fixed on her shoes, her shoulders crushed under an invisible weight. Exactly in the same posture as the week before, last time Jack saw her. The only difference was that now, the shoes she was so determined to observe were clean and new, no more mud, no more blood. Her silence, though, had lost nothing of its morbidity.

Witnessing the slaughter of one's family would do that to a child.

Sordid case, really. Sordid enough to make the local then national news. Yet another Tuesday for Jack, one that should have been easy since they had caught the killer the very next day of his crime. They just missed a formal identification by the only surviving witness.

But the kid hadn't breathed a word in a week. She seemed to have nothing left to offer to the world than her unwavering muteness. And, after watching the pictures of the slaughtered bodies, Jack genuinely wondered if the world deserved anything more than that.

Yet, deserving or not, they needed the girl's words.

Hannibal had come quickly and had sat with the girl for nearly two hours. He had talked. He had added softness to his voice to prove that she had nothing to fear, and he had added detachment to indicate that she had nothing to prove. By the end of the session, he had stood up, affirmed that it had been nice to meet her, and he had left. The girl hadn't pronounced a word, but her eyes had left her shoes.

Lecter and Jack had talked in the corridor, not even a minute later.

"So?"

"A severe case of Selective Muteness. Nothing irreversible, with a bit of luck and a bit of time. She has the physical ability to speak. And maybe, even the will. But anxiety prevents her from producing the slightest sound. Give her time, and therapy."

"I thought you could maybe be her therapist. We need her to speak again. Maybe with your help, she could."

"I'm afraid that won't be possible, Jack. I agreed to talk to Will, and I'm always happy to share my expertise, but I am a private practitioner. I don't take patients from the FBI."

"I'm guessing you're not planning on changing that in the near future?"

"The FBI would never agree to my fees, Jack."

"That bad?"

"Think about what I ask for Will, and add a zero behind."

"That would explain why such a refined office for such a small clientele. But you deserve it, Doctor."

"I do. As for the child, that would be a case for Doctor Bloom, and she will be just as competent as me, once she will be back from Vancouver. Though, if you really want my advice, then I would recommend you seek the help of Doctor J. Rufin, established in Paris. He is an expert in speech impairment after traumas. He had set the precedents and the frames for every therapeutic procedure followed for that kind of issue. For some cases, he has been able to have great results in very short times. He is as close of a miracle worker as a respectable Doctor can be. Everything that either I, or Alana may know about this situation, we had learned it from him, directly or not."

"Could you write down his name?"

It took time, but it was worth it, in the end. The girl had started to talk again, in a weak raspy voice, all thanks to the effort of Doctor J. Rufin.

Rufin, Jack discovered after meeting him at the airport, was a very old man. Approaching his eighties, he seemed to be one of those who had dedicated their life to their work to the point that the mere idea of retirement had never occurred to them. This Doctor would die in his office, that was a sure thing. But, he had been every bit as competent as Lecter had assured, and he was even a rather pleasant man to work with. He was calm and professional, yet he always seemed to be curious about everything, to find enthusiasm in the smallest details, and to consider it his duty to cheer everyone around him. He was a great

listener but an even greater entertainer. He had a real talent with kids, who seemed to be the majority of his patients, and he himself could sometimes show a bit of childlike eccentricity. Jack soon realized that this behavior was also for him a great way to amuse children, and maybe that was one of the reasons the girl eventually opened up.

Outside of work, Jack had spent a couple of evenings with the man. Mostly to build a good work relationship between the French doctor and the FBI, but the company had been pleasant nonetheless. Rufin had asked hundreds of questions about the FBI, showing the fantasist curiosity characteristic of civilians, and Jack had done his best to preserve the romanticized mystery around his work, much to Rufin's enjoyment.

When the girl had talked again, and Rufin had advised for her to meet a more general therapist, Jack naturally offered the Doctor to drive him back to the airport.

"I never had the occasion to work with the FBI before," had informed Rufin over the sound of rain and the whooshing of the wipers.

That much, Jack had guessed.

"It's a shame, really. Your expertise could be a huge help when dealing with traumatized victims."

"Oh, I did that a lot. I often work with local polices in Europe. But for whatever reason, I don't export well in the US. I blame the national complex of superiority."

"A very American complex. And it's a real shame for us. Though, I have to admit you were recommended by a fellow European."

"Really? And what would be the name of that fellow European?"

"His name's Hannibal Lecter. Maybe you know him?"

"Of course, I do! It was a long time ago, I admit, but I remember him vividly. He left quite an impression."

"You two are friends? He speaks very highly of you."

"I wouldn't say friend. Professionalism and basic ethics would prevent me. But, no matter what my most hopeful colleagues may think and say, success stories like his are extremely rare."

"Success stories like his?"

“Well, maybe this term is tactless, but it is the first time an old patient of mine is in a position to recommend me, so it calls for strong words.”

The heavy droplets of rain, falling against the windshield and the sheet-steel, created a constant, muffled sound that instilled the surreal feeling of being cut out from the world.

Jack knew he shouldn’t ask. He had not conscientized it, but he could sense it in a way. Yet…

“An old patient of yours?”

“Well, yes. Why else would you trust him to know if I’m worthy of recommendation?”

“Well… he recommended you as a colleague.”

“A colleague?”

“A fellow psychiatrist.”

The silence settled. Or tried to, the rain impeding greatly its plan.

“Oh.”

And now it was awkward. Jack winced silently, searching for quick words to break the unsettling silence. They must have found them at the same time since they both resumed:

“I’m really sorry, I thought…”

“It’s on me, really. I…”

“Had I known you…”

“I shouldn’t have presumed that…”

The aborted attempts of sentences stopped simultaneously, and both men remained in an heavy, uncomfortable silence. They drove for several long, painful minutes in the rain and the fog. Then Dr J. Rufin resumed:

“What I said was absolutely out of place and unprofessional. I always forget that Hannibal made it as a psychiatrist and is now my colleague. I assumed he came to you under other circumstances, and I assumed wrong.”

“It’s okay, Doctor. I am sure that, if he recommended you to me, he didn’t mind the topic being addressed at some point.”

“The Doctor-Patient confidentiality is sacred no matter how many years passed. It was still up to him to decide what should be said. I thought he had mentioned it first, it was absolutely not my place to even acknowledge the topic.”

“Then nothing has been said. It was not my intention to put you in any awkward position, and I’m willing to forget everything that had been said in this car.”

He didn’t forget, though. And even long after Rufin had flown back to Europe, he found himself thinking about it again, his mind always coming back to that little piece of information he had inadvertently received.

Ultimately, it took less than two weeks for Jack to mention it again. If he were one to be kind with himself and try to find excuses, he would have acknowledged how guilt had been slowly eating away at him. He could handle guilt in his professional life. He had to. But Doctor Lecter was just close enough to him to make him uneasy at the idea of lying to that man.

It was therefore during one of their dinners than the topic was brought up.

Those moments had become sacred between the two men. It was too rare for Jack to have something of a normal interaction with someone. Granted, Doctor Lecter was a bit weird in his own way – Jack blamed it on his European upbringing – but still, they didn’t have to talk about murders, tortures, or the perversion of mankind. They didn’t have to talk about cancer and loss either. Most of the time, they would talk about food, art and philosophy, matters that Jack, lost in the swirling upside-down world that was his job, had nearly forgotten he enjoyed as well.

It was supposed to be one of those nights, one dedicated to the few things humanity was able to do right, but Doctor Lecter, always so receptive, brought the whole conversation on another path altogether.

“Far from me the idea to impose my psychanalyses on you, Jack, but is something bothering you?”

“What would give you such a suspicion?”

“I find you to be rather distracted. As a matter of fact, I found you to be rather distracted for the past few times we met. Not that I am taking it personally, but whatever this may be, it appears that you have not been able to address and solve the issues yet. Maybe I can be of help. Even if just in the form of a benevolent ear.”

Jack rolled the stem of the glass he held between his index finger and thumb, detailing how the dimmed lights of Hannibal’s living room were reflected and darkened between the profound shades of red of the wine. Maybe he could talk about it, after all. Maybe it would be better that way.

“I have a bit of a moral dilemma,” he finally admitted.

“Moral dilemmas are my specialty,” answered Hannibal with an encouraging smile. “I eat them for breakfast.”

“Here’s the situation. One friend learnt something about another friend that that other friend didn’t mean for the first to know about. The first friend is then confronted with the choice of letting the second friend know about what has been learnt. Or the one of not saying a word and let the second friend believe their privacy has been respected. According to you, what should the first friend do?”

“Providing the first friend is a good friend?”

“Yes.”

Hannibal seemed to think about it for a second, his eyes traveling along the several potted plants that, aligned with each other, formed a natural wall opposed to the mantelpiece.

“I can see three different settings and therefore three different answers,” he finally announced conversationally.

“What would those be, Doctor?”

“The first situation would be that the first friend is able to not act upon that new piece of information. Relegate it to a remote corner of their mind and never mention it. Then, nothing needs to be addressed. The second friend can believe that their privacy had not been disrespected, as ignorance can only hurt us if someone is using it against us. The first friend is then a good friend by protecting the second friend’s silence.”

The Doctor brought his glass to his lips and barely brushed over the ruby-colored surface, just enough to have the smell and the lingering taste but none of the alcohol.

“The second situation will see the first friend unable to handle their own guilty conscience faced with the knowledge that they breached the trust that has been placed upon them. In that case, the first friend should come clean. For their own sake more than the one of the second friend. Unaddressed guilt and shame, even about the most mundane of matters, can sour the purest of friendships.”

Jack detailed his host for a few seconds. Yeah, that seemed about right. He knew the whole situation was not entirely his fault, and Hannibal was wise enough to see it too, no matter how upset he could be by the situation.

“And the third setting?” he nonetheless asked.

“The first friend said just enough for the second friend to guess that something has been said and that they are concerned.”

The dark, clever eyes of the Doctor had left the wall of leaves to lock with Jack’s. Of course, he had guessed.

“What then?”

“Then the first friend must say it all. For as soon as one knows something is hidden, then half truths become complete lies.”

Jack put down his glass of wine and detailed for a second his plate, as if he could find back his appetite somewhere along the trails of white butter sauce. When he realized he couldn’t, he faced Hannibal again.

“I must say I am very sorry for that tactless approach.”

“What is this about, Jack? How was my trust betrayed?”

Despite the sharpness of the chosen words, Hannibal's tone was light and casual. As if he didn't fear for any of his secrets. He seemed confident in the fact that, whatever had been done, it was nothing that he would truly mind.

"Not on purpose, I can assure you. I was simply having a conversation, unrelated to you, and I had no idea what was being brought up before it was too late."

"If that is truly the case, then I can't in good faith blame you for having followed whatever path a good conversation brought you to. If I were to deem that a sin, I would have been the first to fall for it."

"It was a discussion with Doctor J. Rufin."

"I see where this is going."

There was a silence after that. Hannibal finally took a full sip of his drink, letting the flavors untie themselves under his palate. Or letting Jack's mind untie itself from the trickiness of the situation. One or the other.

"I offer you my most sincere apologies, Doctor."

"Don't let guilt punish you too harshly, Jack. It was a piece of information you received without asking for it, I gather."

"Yes, I brought up your name, to let Doctor J. Rufin know that you were the one who recommended him. He understood you did so as a patient, when I meant as a colleague."

"When I advised you to seek his expertise, I knew that such a misunderstanding could occur. Was his intervention helpful?"

"With the girl? Yes. We were able to get some answers. And Rufin is hopeful that more will come with time."

"Then it is all that matters. I don't really mind you knowing that I myself was once a patient of Dr J. Rufin. I did not bring it up on my own as I don't believe it matters in any way, but it is not a fact I am ashamed about."

"So, no harm has been done?"

"No harm, Jack. No harm at all."

Relieved beyond what he thought his anxiety to be, Jack offered a genuine smile to his host and went back to his plate, finding a renewed love for the fish he had been toying with since the beginning of the dinner. Though, after a generous bite, he couldn't help himself but wonder.

"I do have a question, though, Doctor. If you don't mind, that is."

"I don't mind at all."

"If you were that familiar with that girl's condition, why didn't you tell me how to address it directly? You obviously recovered completly so you must have some ideas about what should be done in that kind of situation."

"Child mutism can have multiple causes. Not all of them calling for the same help. In the case you presented me with, I was able to guess that the cause for the muteness was extreme anxiety. The expectation of talking being so heavy on the child's shoulders, it would make it impossible for her to speak. Like a very severe case of stage fright, even if we could guess that public ridicule was not what she feared. As a psychiatrist, though I do have some knowledge about Selective Muteness, I also know that Doctor Rufin has more experience, and the sort of results you want for a case as serious as the one you had in your hands. And as a former patient, there was nothing I could bring to the table as the reason for my own muteness was fundamentally different from the reason for hers."

"How was it different?"

"The reason why I wouldn't talk was not because of fear. It was simply because the world had lost its meaning. And without meaning, what are words, but noise? The reason why I didn't speak was simply because silence and noise were saying and doing just as much, and silence was simply more pleasant."

Jack did not mention the topic ever again. If he guessed something must have had happened to strip an entire world of its meaning, he didn't ask about it. There were some answers that were simply not his to have.

All he knew after that diner, all he cared to know was that, somewhere between childhood and adulthood, the world had left Hannibal speechless.

The fact that someone who knew as many words in as many languages as the Doctor couldn't find any that could say something was strangely relatable. This simple fact made sense. Even human words failed to reflect human experiences. It was logical, in Jack's world. He simply didn't know it was a truth in Hannibal's world as well.

A year later, when Jack Crawford discovered what Hannibal Lecter was, he thought about that unwanted information again. And he pushed it far in the depth of his mind. He didn't wish to think about it. He didn't wish to care. He feared that finding the Ripper excuses, even by accident, would make him just as monstrous as the monster himself.

And Crawford, though he now knew it certainly wasn't the truth, still considered that Hannibal Lecter had had a privileged life. Far too privileged for someone like *him*.

II

Chilton hated Lecter.

He had to admit it, even if only to himself. Sure, he was able to put on a mask of appropriate sociability, laughing to the man's jokes, praising the man's work or agreeing with the man's opinions. But simply because he had to in order to remain in the good grace of Baltimore's elite. Lecter was the center of this perfect little world, and Chilton was far too clever to think he could remain a part of this high society without Hannibal's acceptation.

That was another thing infuriating with the good Doctor Lecter. He seemed like he wasn't even trying. He didn't appear to have to produce any effort in order to be loved, and recognized, and acknowledged. No matter how elusive his presence was at the diner parties, how rare his words were during conversations, how obscure his opinions remained, every single time, the only thing everyone remembered about whatever occasion was the very few things Hannibal had deigned to offer. As if the man could be the beating heart of this world, while remaining completely outside of it. Which was beyond nerve racking.

The fact that this insufferable European could, with little less than three words, overshadow everyone else in the room was, more than unjust, frightening. Who would talk about the magnificent piece Chilton had written for World Psychiatry, when Lecter had shared a poor, meaningless, anecdote about a patient of his between the cheese and the desert? Who cared about his appointment to the post of general administrator of the BSHCI, when Hannibal had condescended to bless his celebratory reception with his mere existence?

Not that Chilton was jealous in any way. Nothing was more unnerving than the mere idea to share any resemblance with this man. Even though people sometimes underlined some similarities. Even the dear Doctor Bloom had pointed out to him that he had the same snobby attitude as Lecter. Yet, once again, what was charming coming from the Lithuanian seemed to be deemed annoying in him. Bloom didn't seem to mind the "snobby attitude" when she was praising her mentor's latest work and great personality in front of the entire research community, yet she couldn't even look at Chilton without a wince of displeasure.

This whole situation was unfair and illogical at every angle one could see it from. Why could Lecter have effortlessly what Chilton had to work daily to fail to achieve?

Frederick blamed it on the accent. Hannibal was European. How exotic! How interesting! He benefited from the brand of old and noble respectability that this part of the world inspired in the collective imagination. Sure, it was a double-edged gift – and *maybe* Chilton had once or twice carelessly reminded some of the most conservative figures of their little society that Lithuania was still a soviet and therefore a *communist* country at the time of Hannibal's childhood – but, as often, life seemed to only throw the best possible outcomes under the feet of Doctor Perfect Lecter, as he managed to thrive in a world as American as Baltimore's elite, despite being himself from a country that was deemed the enemy, not so long ago.

But that was doomed to change. One way or another. Novelty always wore off. It was a reality Chilton had been able to observe countless times over his life. One day, people would realize that nothing about Doctor Lecter was that interesting to start with, and then Chilton will have his chance thanks to his steady and relentless work and efforts. And maybe, today was one of the memorable dates that would mark this turning point.

As Frederick Chilton was invited to a party where Hannibal Lecter wasn't.

Fine, maybe the "fear the communist" plan had been working in some measures. And maybe the all American, all conservative figures that were at the initiative of this evening had more issues with Lecter's accent than with his annoying personality or dubious work ethic. But Chilton wasn't sure he felt a lot of guilt regarding that state of affairs. Yes, he knew his origins were not what was problematic with Lecter, and he also disagreed with most of the extreme political views held by the other guests, but a win was a win and an invitation, an invitation. The fact was that numerous very highly regarded members of the medical community were gathered here, that Chilton was a part of them, and that Lecter wasn't.

It was exactly the kind of place both Hannibal and Frederick enjoyed. It was historical and refined, austere yet indubitably expensive. The guests were sorted in groups of table, depending on their worth, their affiliations, and their past quarrels.

Obviously, Chilton noticed his own table was nowhere near the center of the room, but Hannibal wasn't even *inside* the room, so he nearly didn't mind. The variety of his neighbors was representative of the variety in the room, therefore barely existent. There was only one other Doctor in medicine, a world-renowned surgeon of the former generation, that even Chilton respected. Among the others could be found a former teacher in political sciences from Harvard, a senator's widow, a retired ambassador, a burn out politician, the host of a Christian tv section and the head of a powerful moms' association.

Chilton knew it was more political than it was social. After all, all the tables were organized around the center one where the possible future governor of Maryland and his closest supporters could be found. But still, it was a selective gathering, and the Doctor cared very little for the undertone. They were fine people enough to know who was worth being invited, and who wasn't.

Yet, somehow *he* came up. As he always did. Too Chilton genuine annoyance.

"Have you read Dr Lecter's open letter to Mr John S. Wargen?"

Frederick was about to intervene right away - experience taught him that a well timed mockery could dispel or at least delay incoming praises - but he soon realized he didn't really have to do anything, as hisses of irritation were leaving the lips of several of the men around him. Dear Lecter was really not in conquered ground here.

And, yes, even Chilton had to admit that John S. Wargen was a prick, on the dangerous side of the spectrum. His political assertions were doing a lot of harm to the psychiatric world and even someone like Chilton, for whom the patients' interests were not that high in his list of priority, had to disagree with the potential future governor's friend. But Wargen was a strong supporter and a pillar for the conservative party, and one could not attack him this openly without receiving the active hatred of a large part of the richest elite of the state. Not that Hannibal seemed to care. As always. Why someone who had it as easy as him would care about something as negligible as consequences for his actions?

"This Doctor Lecter is an idealist. And a fool one at that!" mocked the very old, nearly dead teacher sat two seats away from Chilton.

Frederick couldn't deny the small yet intense sparkle of joy he felt in the depths of his chest at that sentence. Yet, he had some notion of decorum and brought his glass to his lips to hide any unwelcome smile. He couldn't risk being seen by someone who would report his obvious joy to the other side of their world, one very much in love with Hannibal.

"His words were typical of a man that gets to benefits from America's riches and yet finds a way to spit on them. If he wanted for the state to take care of everyone, at the expense of the hard-working classes, then he should have stayed in his country."

"It's the thing with socialists. They are the noisiest in their preach, yet the first to flee their countries and seek refuge in the United States."

Chilton had to admit that it was a bit much to talk about socialism when Hannibal had merely pointed out that, mental illness being one of the major causes and consequences of homelessness, closing the few mental health care centers that offered free help would do nothing to "discourage" people from living in the street, and that psychiatric cares were not a "luxury", as Wargen had put it.

Once again, Frederick did not strongly disagree with Lecter, he simply didn't care enough to voice this disagreement. Homelessness was sad and all, but not a hill he was willing to die on. As a matter of fact, Chilton was not willing to die at all, thank you very much.

"He had a point, though."

Chilton glanced at Dr Emerson who had just spoke.

The old surgeon was rich and powerful enough to not be cut off, but it was obvious that everyone around the table was ready to dismiss whatever came next as the "rambling of an old man that time had softened beyond reason". Yet Doctor Emerson did not seem to notice or care about it and resumed.

"I read the letter. Dr Lecter was pointing out, with a rather obvious logic, that, since no one would willingly lose their house just to have free therapy, suppressing mental health care would do nothing to decrease the number of homeless people but would indubitably increase insecurity and violence in the street. Without taking into account the moral argument – that is a personal matter – from a political point of view those assertions are also rather stupid. I don't disagree with the Doctor Lecter. Wargen is an idiot."

Those were not the words that could be spoken in such a society. Chilton now had his answer. It's not that Emerson didn't notice. It was that he was genuinely too old to give a shit anymore.

Yet, no one dared to voice their complaints. Emerson was just too comfortably seated in his little world, no one was willing to try and push him around, especially in front of an assembly with such a good memory for social interaction.

"You... Uh, you know the man?" asked an old lady on their right, as to break the awkward silence.

"Barely. I mentored him during his years at Hopkins but that was an eternity ago."

"How is he? I never met him."

Chilton was about sure the widow had simply been trying to change the topic of conversation, as the ambiance at the table was turning a bit too sour for such an evening.

"As I said, I mentored him, but that's all. I wouldn't say I know him in any way. The last time we talked it was the day he left Hopkins, and he was something like twenty at that time."

Chilton noticed right away the strange number. Hannibal was after all a well-known Hopkins graduate. Yet...

"He left Hopkins before finishing his cursus?" he asked Emerson.

Oh, that was gossip material beyond what Chilton had hoped for.

"No, he didn't. He left after his graduation."

"You said he was twenty..."

"About twenty. But he had already done his med school in France. He had completed the eight years cursus in four years and when he was recommended to me by his teacher, he was eighteen but he only had his residency left to do. So, I only had to mentor him for about three years before he graduated and left. So it was a long time ago, Doctor Lecter was barely an adult, and he wasn't even a psychiatrist, yet. All good reasons to admit that I don't think I really know the man. Yet, it changes nothing to his letter, and he had a point."

Chilton remained silent for the remaining of the dinner. And he promised himself to never breathe a word about it to anyone. People didn't need more reason to admire Lecter.

And Chilton continued to defend that his master thesis was more in depth and groundbreaking than Hannibal's. He would just forget to mention that he wrote his dissertation when he was 25, and Hannibal when he was 16.

Damn, Chilton hated Lecter.

A year later, when Frederick Chilton discovered what Hannibal Lecter was, he thought about that conversation again. And he wrote about it. It was good for sales, after all. What everyone found so praiseworthy before became proportionally fear mongering.

And Chilton, though he still hated Lecter, had nothing to be jealous of anymore. He was invited to parties, and Lecter could stare at his celling until his boring, unnoticed and

hopefully early demise.

III

For someone supposed to be so well adapted to society, Hannibal Lecter sure showed a lot of misanthropic tendancies. It was at least Beverly Katz's unpopular opinion.

Yes, the guy didn't let awkward silences settle, didn't wince each time he had to shake some hands, and didn't inadvertently insult everyone in the room – those traits were reserved to Will Graham – but still, Katz doubted he was as friendly and as outgoing as everyone believed.

First of all, Lecter didn't seem to have many friends, and the few he had, he didn't seem to seek their presence that much. Though she never went herself, Katz knew he spent a lot of evenings at the Opera, or at whatever fancy reception being held in Baltimore, so he was able to stand social companionship. Each time she saw him, he seemed to have no trouble interacting with whoever was in the room with them. Yet, she had never heard him mention anyone that mattered to him. No family, no lover, no friend at all. As if he didn't know anyone, despite the fact that everyone knew him.

Then, what was also suspicious was the insane amount of free time this man seemed to have. Bev knew he had his private practice but had a rather low number of clients, since he had the luxury to choose them, and then set insane prices for his high-demanded services. That could be one of the reasons he was so easily available when things mattered to him. It often appeared that Will could call him at every hour of the day or the night, and that Lecter would be willing and able to answer. He could also travel very far from Baltimore if Jack needed him for a case – in exchange for an indecent paycheck, though, Bev had noticed. And a low number of clients didn't justify that much freedom. If Hannibal had friends, he didn't seem to spend any time with them at all. Or the bare minimum social expectations demanded. Which was strange if one were to take into account the extensive list of people who only had praises for the Doctor. As if everyone loved him, but Hannibal deemed very few people worthy of his time.

And yes, indubitably, he also spent a lot of time in mondain companies. Whatever big event was happening in Baltimore, Hannibal was a part of it. However, it was only the most elitist and the most important of events that he would go to. Everything less would be granted his disregard. And even then, Bev having had quite the painful middle school experience, she knew how easy it was to be alone in the midst of crowds.

Those were all the reasons why Bev couldn't help but doubt a bit each time someone mentioned how social Hannibal Lecter was. No matter the ease of his smile, the politeness of his wit and the natural of his conversation, something always seemed asocial about him, though she couldn't quite place it.

It was when he was with them that it was the most obvious. By them, she meant Jimmy, Brian and her. Lecter enjoyed the company of Will and Jack, the conversations between them were always easy and amused. But with them… not so much. There was a

strange awkwardness in the air, as if no one truly knew what to talk about. It was obvious that Hannibal Lecter was living in a world far different from theirs, and that he didn't exactly enjoy the sneak peaks that were granted to him, each time he had to interact with the threesome.

Maybe they were a bit too noisy, a bit too bitchy and a bit too blunt for the calm and cautious Doctor Lecter who didn't like to be dragged into their friendly bickering, which nearly always happened to everyone entering a conversation with the three of them. And since they were always with each other, it was no surprise that he never stayed in the headquarters with them more than strictly necessary. Hannibal was obviously a man that enjoyed being in control, that was used to it, and he could hardly find amusement nor ease in the anarchic, lively personalities of the scientific team that cared very little for conventions and expectations.

Nonetheless, Bev didn't dislike the guy. Hannibal had his own tastes, yet he had never shown them with ostentation, and had never blamed any of them for their sometimes unprofessional behavior. He would never enter their games or conversations, but never complain about them either, simply watching them interact with a guarded silence. He knew he was not part of their team, and had no desire to have an impact on it.

That was why this evening had been unexpected and one to be remembered, as Hannibal entered the pub with them, leaving the raging blizzard for the cozy and warm ambiance.

Earlier this evening, they had just closed their latest case, which had required the help of Doctor Lecter who had spent the afternoon with them to help them with the interrogation of suspects in the absence of Doctor Bloom. But when they had finished everything and signed the last pieces of paper, the snowstorm that had been falling upon the entire county during the day, had been simply too dense and heavy for Hannibal to drive back to Maryland, forcing him to stay overnight at Quantico. Which meant that he had little to no excuse to get out of their post-case drink, and he had to accept Jack's invitation, though Bev was clearly able to tell he had a very long list of things he would rather do than go to the pub with them.

Yet, here he was, and it was simply hilarious, from Bev's perspective. Hannibal Lecter was out of place in every way but his acknowledgment. His expensive handmade tailored coat that was certainly worth more than a month of Katz's salary, his noble bearing and mannered postures in the smoky, sticky atmosphere of the pub, his wordy cordialities and soft voice when ordering his cheap beer, everything seemed like some kind of parody just for her eyes. One she enjoyed every second of by committing it to memory as to be able to mention it again at some point in the future.

"You never went to a pub before?" she asked after two drinks.

The music was loud, and she had to lean into his ear to be heard over it. Jack, Brian and Jimmy were currently busy bragging around the billiard, but Hannibal hadn't wished to play, and Beverly had also refused, as none of the boys could be of any challenge to her.

"Of course, I did. Going to the pub is a rather common thing to do."

"You don't strike me as the kind to go to pubs."

"I am a complex kind. I did all sorts of things in my life."

"Really?"

Beverly offered the guy her "you have all my focus" glance, and, bringing her beer to her lips to finish the few remaining droplets, she resumed in an amused tone:

"Do tell, please!"

"Complete tax returns, watch movies, do laundry. All kinds of activities just as extravagant and unusual as going to a pub. I led a wild and untamed life."

Beverly had to press a hand against her mouth to prevent her laughter from spitting out the beer in her mouth. She swallowed with difficulty before resuming:

"So you do have a sense of humor."

"Normally a more sophisticated one than that. Sarcasm is a poor and easy form of humor, I apologize for that."

"Don't, I deserved it. But you have to admit, this" – she gestured around "doesn't seem to be your element."

"And what would be my element, then, Miss Katz?"

"I don't know. Fine music and expensive wine?"

"What gives off that impression?"

"Your fine clothes and expensive car."

"Taste calls taste."

Following a gestured order from Jack, one of the barmaids brought five full pints on the table, the abruptness of her motions sending a bit of foam and liquid flying around. Beverly had to bite her lips to not laugh at the wronged side glance Hannibal threw at the glasses, his precise fingers quickly leaving the wood surface for the safety of his own knees.

"Fine" he finally conceded. "I will admit it. The few times I ever entered a pub, it had never been with the will to have fun, and always to achieve ulterior goals. This is not my… kind of party."

"Cheers to sincerity, Doctor Lecter."

He took the pint Katz handed him and carefully brought the amber-colored liquid to his lips. He concealed his wincing behind a polit throat clearing.

"Nonetheless," he resumed, his voice deeper but still as soft, as if unbothered, "the lack of expensive beverage does nothing to prevent me from appreciating the fine company."

"Smooth talker, Doctor. Very smooth."

"As I've been told."

And talk, they did.

It was during that evening that she realized that, even though he would never make it into her very selective list of friends, Hannibal Lecter was good company. He was a good listener, and a skillful talker, knowing perfectly well the balance between those two. He was knowledgeable in everything and capable of carrying a conversation about any topics, and yet never seemed to actively try to outshine his interlocutor. His words were always wise and deep, leaving Bev wondering if she had understood everything that had been said, and leaving her wanting to hear a bit more.

And by the fourth beer, he could even become amusing. His fourth beer or her fourth beer, she didn't know, but one or the other.

By the middle of the night, and already well into their fifth drink – Jack, Jimmy and Brian were still somehow ahead of them – they began to talk about their life outside of work. The kind of conversation that can only be had with the exact right level of alcohol. She talked about her sister, and how annoying it was that she thought she was able to invite herself to spend a couple of days in Bev's flat without even thinking about asking her. She talked a bit about the childhood they had together and, maybe for the first time, admitted the bit of

jealousy she had been harboring since that period. Hannibal told little himself. He simply listened and, from time to time, acknowledged the legitimacy of her feelings, as anyone who had nothing to say would do. Beverly could tell, by how calm and silent he was, that Hannibal had not had to be confronted with siblings, growing up. He simply didn't seem to have been confronted with any kind of opposition ever. She was sure he was an only child, and when she told him she was impressed he hadn't been spoiled by that, he simply smiled and drank another sip of his beer.

Then, they talked about their work and how they came into the field they were today. Emotions and alcohol burning her throat, she spoke about her friend that was shot when she was in high school, and how she had wanted to make a difference after that. How she had a deep-rooted need to understand stuff, and how this deep-rooted need guided her to the FBI where Jack took her in his team despite an obvious lack of experience, at the time. Hannibal didn't ask any question, but let her talk at her own rhythm, respecting the moments of silence she felt like having between her thoughts. When she finally asked about him, his answer was rather short. He had to study something, and medicine was just as fine a field as literature, engineering or law.

"That's all? No grand motivation? No will to make the world a better place? To heal people?"

"Sorry to disappoint you."

"I am far beyond disappointment. Then why medicine and not any other field that would also please mummy and daddy?"

"I guess I like the human aspect of medicine. I would rather deal with human beings than numbers or institutions."

"Really?"

"Yes. Is it that surprising to like human beings?"

"Uh, yeah! Let's be honest, most sucks."

"Well, those I don't like, I somehow still find them a worth in the end. Even if I need to be quite creative for some."

After that, they talked briefly about Jack and how it was nice to watch him have a bit of fun, since it wasn't something he would often have currently. They then talked about the other members of the department, people that Hannibal knew, and some not so much. Beverly had a lot of tea to spill on a lot of people, but Lecter seemed to care very little about her gossips, though he was polite enough to ask her the right questions to help her deliver all her pieces of information.

"You really don't give a fuck at all, do you?"

“About the scandalous extramarital love affair of Kelly of the Human Resource Service? No, not really, sorry. I don’t know her enough to be emotionally or ethically involved in her situation.”

Beverly could sense a good conversation opportunity when it presented itself to her, and she was not one to miss it.

“Then tell me, who are you emotionally involved with?”

She crossed her legs, waiting for the answer with a small predatory smile.

“I find my friendship with Jack and Will to be genuinely fulfilling in many ways.”

“Oh, come on! I meant romantically and you know it!”

He had a light, nearly imperceptible chuckle, indicating that, indeed, he knew it.

“I could help you, you know,” she offered. “Give you an insight on their situation. Even talk about you to them, if you want.”

“I want neither. I don’t think I need help, thank you very much.”

“So who, then? For the sake of my curiosity.”

“Once again, nothing but disappointment, I fear. No one interests me in that way. I don’t easily fall in love with my fellow human beings.”

“Who talked about love? A good meaningless fuck never hurt anyone.”

“I don’t easily fall in lust either.”

“Nicely said.”

“Is it really?”

“Considering the amount of alcohol we drunk… yeah! Pretty nice, Doctor!”

Hannibal slightly bowed his head, as if humbly accepting a well-crafted compliment, but Beverly didn't let him off the grip that easily.

"Fine, if you're so selective on your love stories, then tell me about your first."

"My first love? Did we truly drink enough for that?"

Beverly marked a silence, her eyes slowly rolling as if she was deep in thoughts, gauging something in the air, before finally resuming;

"My first crush was on a boy in the football team, in highschool. I befriended his sister as a way to get closer to him. Ultimately dated the sister when I realized she was much more fun than the brother."

She let a new silence settle, as if waiting for something to happen, and when nothing of the sort occurred, she smiled at Lecter:

"Seemed like we're at the right level of alcohol. So? You?"

Hannibal crossed his legs, both his hands resting on top of his knee, as his eyes followed the erratic gestures of Jimmy that was arguing with Brian, as he nearly always was.

"Her name was Lady Murasaki."

"Lady?"

"She was one and not only for me. She was older, but I was more mature than most of my age."

"Isn't that what we all think?"

"It was true in my case. I had already lived a full life by the time I met her."

"How was she?"

"Beautiful in ways that Renaissance paintings had tried to enclose and immortalize, except she was free and very much alive."

“Seems like you genuinely loved her.”

“I did. As genuinely as I could, anyway.”

“You ended up together?”

“For an evening. After years of silent longing. Then we parted.”

“T’sucks. Let me guess, you’re not the one who left.”

“No, but I was the one who decided to walk paths she couldn’t follow. She left, but I carry the blame.”

“Did she love you too?”

“She did. Not in the way she wanted to love me, and I guess it is also one of the reasons for her departure.”

“When you say departure, you don’t mean simply from your relationship.”

“She left the country.”

“Damn, that’s kinda excessive, isn’t it?”

“We had excessive feelings for each other. Ultimately, I’m happy with how things happened. She had no other choice but to leave, and we got to preserve the best of each other in our memories.”

“Seems quite the love story.”

“Let just say that when such high standards are placed at the very beginning of one’s love life, very few people are then able to meet the expectations.”

Beverly found it both sad and beautiful, but as those conversations always were, it seemed dulled and lessened when alcohol wore off. After all, all things considered, Hannibal hadn’t said a lot that evening. Not much more than the little he was saying the rest of the time. And having fallen in love with an older woman was not the kind of information that would shatter Berverly’s views on the Doctor. That was why it nearly went completely out of her mind in a matter of days. Only to hit her several months later.

Will was in prison, and she was charged to investigate his wild claims about Lecter. It was only then that she found the name again, and only then that she understood one simple fact about Hannibal as she was browsing his family history.

Hannibal Lecter was a motherfucker. Literally.

Well, she was his aunt, but she also was his adoptive mother. A fact he somehow forgot to mention during their conversation, preferring to evoke her beauty rather than her legal status. How nasty that Oedipus complex must have been, for him to still speak so highly of her after that many years?

That was what Beverly Katz inadvertently learned about Hannibal Lecter. Not that he had been in love, he had readily admitted it himself. But that, despite being a psychiatrist, he had certain issues he truly needed to address…

Beverly Katz never did anything with this information. She died too abruptly, too violently.

If Beverly had been able to think about it, she would have wondered if Hannibal knew. If he had already decided she would eventually die when he had answered her question. And that it was the only reason why he had answered.

If, as they had drunk together, he had smiled at her jokes or at the fantasied visions of her exhibited corpse.

IV

Alana Bloom had had strong feelings for Hannibal Lecter since their first encounter.

To be honest, the first time around, she encountered him more than he encountered her. She met him as a guest lecturer a few times, during which occasions she had learned to hate him for his ability to give much information in few words, making a painful ordeal out of her note taking. She had to create a small group with her closest friends so they could share their lessons and make sure they had everything the teacher had said – which was somehow never the case in all her years at Hopkins.

Then, she had gotten to know him a bit more when he became her mentor during her residency. She had been afraid, at first. Lecter had the reputation to set an insanely high level of expectations for his mentees, driving them to the lowest pit of self-loathing as they gradually realized how dumb and useless they were. Which was quite surprising as he was known to be a kind and helpful figure for every other student than his own. When Alana had asked him about that, years later, he had simply said that it was an honor for him to help the future of medicine, but that his own students were a reflection of himself and, therefore, had to answer to the same work ethic and result expectations he set for himself. Which made

sense, in a way, Alana guessed, but still drove numerous students to deep depression as few egos could survive a comparison with Doctor Lecter.

Yet, at that time, Alana proved herself to be good enough and her resentment for that guest lecturer turned into admiration for her mentor. Even then, she knew she was his favorite student, which was no small feat, and that strongly deepened their mutual appreciation. During her residency, she would try her best to challenge him and amuse him, as to prove herself worthy of his attention, yet at the same time, without ever acknowledging it, she would follow him everywhere, trying to learn everything from that man that seemed sometime so out of this world, and yet so deeply rooted in it. Maybe she developed a bit of a crush, but her future and her life were more important, and she loved Hannibal's knowledges more than Hannibal himself.

However, she may have been the one that had the most accurate appreciation of the skills of the Doctor. She got to witness his last years as a surgeon at the same time as she got to benefit from his guidance for her thesis. That taught her just how ahead of everyone else Lecter was. His mind and hands worked in fashions Alana had never witnessed before, and would never witness again. He was known as a miracle worker, in the ER, yet Alana alone daily noticed how easily those miracles were born under his fingers, how little he had to do to be the best. If everyone guessed, from his background and from his results, that Hannibal was a genius, Alana was the one to figure out he was the kind to mark his century.

Then she graduated, left his mentorship and if she didn't forget the reasons for her admiration, she forgot the intensity of it. After some years, she blamed it on the small crush she had had on him, and Hannibal, from a living god, became a remarkable fellow human being. It was what it meant to grow up, Alana thought. One had to equate their heroes, at some point. When she met him again, a few years later, it was as a colleague.

Hannibal Lecter was not the same man as a guide and as an equal. He had been blinding as a mentor, a light in the darkness of her own ignorance, the only one truly worth noticing to the point where she barely knew the name of the other Doctors working with her. But, as a colleague, Hannibal seemed much more discreet, much more silent. As if he was happy to stand outside of the world and watch it from there. She had known him as a practicitioner focused on his own work and results, and she discovered him as a contemplative man of great curiosity, and little will to intervene. Contrary to the surgeon that would fight death everyday and refuse any concession to it, he was a psychiatrist that liked to let things unfold and bear witness to how the world were to behave if he didn't take a part in it.

They didn't get to interact a lot with each other. They led very different lives, her as a teacher and a researcher working with the FBI, and him as a private practitioner. They would only meet each other at the hazard of conventions and colloquiums, and it would always be a great and genuine joy for the both of them. She would brag a bit about her latest accomplishment, and he would be the proud teacher she wanted him to be. He would say little about himself, but Hannibal Lecter, unlike her, didn't have to prove anything to anyone, so she wouldn't mind.

It was only years later that she got to work with him again, thanks to Will and Jack. And if it had been weird the first few weeks, interacting with him as his equal, as if his opinion was worth exactly the same as her, it quickly fell into a natural order. She had grown in confidence and in strength since John Hopkins, she had discovered her worth along the way, and she didn't need any mentor anymore. Her admiration for him turned into an unmatched respect.

When did she begin to feel love, she wasn't sure of it. She wasn't even sure she truly had any romantical feelings before kissing him, that night, her fingers still on the harpsichord. But it seemed right in the moment, and she found love and lust somewhere along his lips. It was only natural. After all, she always had had strong feelings for him. She realized quickly that it was nearly as easy to love him as it was to admire him. He was attentive in ways few human beings were, making her feel like she was worth being attentive to. He was kind in a cordial, discreet way that didn't call for any debt or any gratefulness, as if kindness was something she was entitled to. He was captivating and entertaining as he had been as a mentor, and supportive and appreciative as he had been as a friend. Yes, he was rather silent, in a way she had never noticed he was before. But after all, he didn't need words to understand and be understood, so Alana didn't find anything to complain about in the elusive nature of her lover.

And she quickly learned he was good with his tongue and fingers even in contexts unrelated to therapy and surgery. That seemed trivial, but since most of their conversations would end up in his bedroom, it had its importance. She knew she loved to be serious with Hannibal, their shared history showed it, but she discovered she also liked having fun and fooling around. Which was not really in her nature. Alana had always been a careful woman for whom her professional life mattered more than anything else. Sex, not even a secondary interest, had been a tertiary one. And rarely had she trusted and loved someone enough to explore it in depth.

Hannibal was different. Maybe because he was older, maybe because he was more curious. In any way, he had much more experiences than Alana, and if she didn't lack confidence, he nonetheless found ways to challenge her and impress her, guiding her in an exploration which was made enjoyable mostly by his presence and attentions.

He was in bed as he was outside of it. Attentive yet captivating. He seemed to notice everything about her, every single breath, every single twitch. She sometimes suspected that he was able to read her body more clearly than she could read her own mind. He somehow always knew what to do and how to do it to either soothe her or madden her depending on his mood. He would spend hours exploring her body and its reaction, and not once she would grow tired of it.

That's also when she sensed in him some dominant tendency. Nothing extreme, and nothing obvious. If it was a kink of him, he didn't say a word about it. No, it was more of a way of being, something intrinsic to his behavior. As if it was natural, for her, for him, for the world, to have him in charge, setting the frame of their lust, delivering the pleasure and quelling their hungers. That too, Alana blamed it on the fact that he was older. Or maybe

simply because they met under uneven dynamics. In any case, not once she had to complain and, once again, she learned a lot from him.

On the other hand, going from friend to lover didn't teach her anything new about Hannibal Lecter. He seemed to be the same with others as he was with her, minus the physical dimension of their affection. He didn't talk more about himself, he didn't reveal new aspects of his personality. She didn't expect to meet his family anytime soon, but nonetheless couldn't help but wonder if the lack of sharing from her lover was telling of the investment he had on the relationship. Though she forced herself to ignore it. Hannibal simply wasn't the kind to mislead or deceive. If he treated that relationship with seriousness, that meant he was serious about it, no matter what he shared or didn't share.

One thing she did learn, though, was that he had a thing for her skin. He would spend waken nights letting his fingers and lips travel along her naked dermis, not seeking pleasure – neither his nor hers – yet fascinated by it as if it was the most entrancing object ever offered to his attention. When she would try to return the favor, he would always reclaim the upper hand, without a fight, without a protest, without even a thought, and, before she could notice, he would resume his exploration of her skin. The only time she had questioned him, half amused half suspicious, about that peculiar interest of his, he had simply answered:

"How could I be blamed? You have such lovely skin."

He had a lovely skin too, she had offered.

"Mine is imprinted with the world. Rough by all the friction with it. It is stretched from a lifetime of enclosing something far too big for it. Yours, on the other hand, is as close to perfection as it gets. It reminds me of snow and feathers."

He had kissed her breast, his lips leaving a burning trail.

"And yours is so much sweeter than mine could ever be."

She had realized early on that there was a weird poetry in the vision Hannibal had of the world, a poetry which, oscillating between symbolism and hermetism, she could never quite understand. But that she liked anyway. So she let him touch, kiss and taste her. It was, after all, a very pleasant sensation.

She, on the other hand, could only get a proper look at him when he was asleep. He had this ability and tendency to shift both their attentions toward her in a matter of seconds, becoming but a looming presence around. He was a giver, much more than he was a receiver. But it also happened sometime for him to fall asleep. It was rare, according to Alana's observations. He was always still conscious when she would fall asleep, and already awake when she would wake up. The man really needed a frighteningly low amount of sleep. But sometimes, Alana would wake up in the middle of the night, and he would be there, laying next to her, his breath even and his face open. Only then she was able to look at him to her heart's content, without any distraction from the Doctor.

And that night was one of those nights, as Alana's clear eyes traveled along the body of her lover dressed in shadows and moonlight.

Hannibal Lecter was beautiful in peculiar, harsh ways that didn't fit the usual standards. Unlike his behavior, there was nothing soft, nothing distinguished on his face and body. As if he had been shaped under the violent tools of a passionate artist. There was an inherent violence to his look, a beauty that was nearly painful and distressing. All those traits were easily forgotten when Hannibal was awake, his attitude, his words, his manners quieting the hardness of his face. But when he was asleep, there was a nakedness to him, a full reveal of a nature hidden during the day.

Alana let her fingers slowly follow the curve of her lover's lips. He had lied. His skin was not rough nor stretched. It was soft and smooth, cherished with the most expensive soaps and most precise cares. She didn't know why Hannibal thought otherwise. Maybe it was just poetic license. Maybe it was just a way for him to say that he felt old.

She carefully leaned forward and kissed those lips. He tasted like pure sugar. A strong, overwhelming taste, as honey so concentrated that it could cover the worst bitterness, the sourer sulfur unnoticeable after one kiss from that mouth.

She let her fingers travel along his jaw and throat, following the beat of his heart under his skin, as she kissed the tip of his nose. That was when she felt it first. A strange smoothness under her fingers. She could still feel the warmth of the dermis, the pulse underneath, and the slow motions of a deep breathing, but there was something missing. The natural rugosity of a human skin. As if it was a material more akin to soft plastic or sanded clay that she could now touch.

Curious, she let her fingers continue their journey, feeling, exploring that strange, unnoticeable peculiarity of Hannibal's skin. She figured that, whatever it was, it was covering nearly half his neck, from his carotid to his trapezius, and from the base of his throat to nearly the beginning of his jaw. It was much larger than she would have thought, especially since she didn't remember noticing anything before. From the feeling of it, she was guessing it was scar tissue, very old considering how regular and soft it was, though she had no idea what could have created such a large and strangely placed scar. Hannibal slowly stirred in his sleep, slowly coming closer to consciousness, and Alana stopped her exploration. She didn't

mean to wake Hannibal up and deprive him of his already too few hours of rest. She would have all the time in the world to ask him about it in the morning.

In the morning, she first forgot about it. It was only while she was observing Hannibal cooking them breakfast that she remembered. Instinctively, her eyes went to his throat before she could say anything. And yes, indeed, there was something there. A scar so old, so blended into the skin, that it was nearly unnoticeable. Only the strange way the light had to reflect on it betrayed its presence, and only to eyes already aware of its existence. But her question died in her mouth before it was even born.

For she recognized the scar. The absolute regularity of its edge. Its extent despite its superficiality. Its gradual disappearance on the external ends. Alana had seen it once before. Only once in her entire life working with the FBI. And it had been on the corps of a woman left to die in the middle of a forest. It was the unique mark of a metal chain freezing against naked skin.

She didn't ask any questions about it.

And never again did she think twice about the absolute absence of Hannibal's family in their relationship.

Later, when Alana discovered what Hannibal Lecter was, she thought about that scar again. And she blamed herself. She had it all under her eyes. She could have guessed, she could have felt that something was wrong. More than that, that something was monstrous. But she had decided to see the better in Hannibal, and to read the scar as the wrongs of the world, and not a clue at the evil it had birthed.

Maybe, if she had doubted for a second, or even if she had asked, *maybe* things would have been different. For Will. For her. And for humanity.

V

"Will I ever know?"

The sun was right over their head, and Will had to close his eyes to protect them from the brightness around them. He could see between his eyelashes, but staring would inevitably bring tears to his eyes. And there was no point in looking around since he knew by heart his environment. The singing creek just a few meters from them; their house behind them with

its columns and balconies; the softness of the golden sand under his fingers; the pinched cords of the lute resonating with the quietude of their afternoon; and the lingering smell of Hannibal, like zests and flowers let loose in the wind; all this was familiar to Will, now. It was the décor among which his life was taking place. He didn't have to see it to feel their little private world waltzing around him.

Hannibal, on the other hand, had his eyes wild open. Light had never bothered him, yet it was so intense that his pupils, contracted to the maximum of their capacity, were barely noticeable among the endless field of red and brown that were his eyes.

"Will you ever know what?"

His voice was soft, just above a whisper, as if he didn't wish to disturb the choir formed by the creek and the lute.

"Your story."

Some cords, pinched just a bit harder, resonated louder than the rest of the melody. Not quite dissonant, but arrogantly singularized.

"You already know everything there is to know."

"Do I, really? Doesn't feel like it."

For a time, the music gradually lowered into silence. Hannibal's eyes followed the course of the whispering water before his fingers resumed his musical improvisation.

"You know that I had a sister. You know that she died. You know that I do to the world what has been done to her. And you know none of that can justify what I am and what I do."

His eyes traveled to Will, and he offered him a warm smile. One that had only begun to blossom between them since their shared fall.

“I didn’t ask about your meaning, Hannibal. Only your story. I am not dumb enough to think you can be justified, or to think that you have roots.”

“Then why are you interested?”

Will tentatively opened his eyes, but renounced right away. Half closed it would be, he decided as he let his head rest against the large rock against which he was laying.

“Because I want to know the whole of you. Even the meaningless.”

For a second, Will wondered why that sudden thought had hit him. There was nothing sudden anymore in their life. And nothing hazardous. Maybe it had been a slow blossom in the depth of his mind, and it had finally emerged. Or maybe the new book of lies that Freddie Lounds had written about them had annoyed him just a bit more than he had thought, and he wanted some truth to be restored, even if only for him. In any way, he knew this question wasn’t that important. And maybe it was how it felt to be rested. The mind dared to venture toward unimportant matters.

“It all began when a Count met a Duchess.”

The voice had resonated above the music, taking all the accents of the old tales coming from forgotten ages.

Will forced himself to open his eyes just a bit more, detailing Hannibal through his tears. He had not really expected his lover to answer. He should have known better, though. Hannibal always answered.

“At least, it should have been like that. But the truth is, the Count was not a count anymore, and the Duchess had lost her titles generations ago. But they were a Count and a Duchess to me, so I guess that’s how our story will go.”

Will drew his knee closer to his chest and rested his chin on it, closing his eyes again to let Hannibal’s voice sing to him.

“They met in a Forced Settlement. They were both very young, barely out of childhood. The Count had been deported there, with his little brother, for counts were not welcomed anymore in countries occupied by the Soviet Union. He had been deemed a threat and an enemy of the people by the very birth that should have brought him power and safety. The Duchess, as for her, was not there because of her birth but because of her upbringing that had turned her into a wise and gentle soul that could hardly bear suffering and injustice. The Count had been sent there to die in silence, and the Duchess had come on her own to save and denounce. She had left her native Italy to travel the world and seek its wonders, but had to stop at its first hideousness, as ignorance and dismissal were unnatural to her.

“I don’t know much about how they lived, there. It had never been something they wished to tell me about. All I know is that their blossoming love had been able to make them smile softly each time they were asked how they met.”

Will had felt that part. He hadn’t spent much time in the Lecter castle, and he had found nothing about the parents. But he had been able to tell that, a long time ago, before the decay and the rotting, it had been a happy home. That place had known love.

“As the shadow of the war slowly drifted away, peace settled. A twisted, suffocating peace, but still a form of peace. And, little by little, the people that had been exiled had been allowed to go back to their country.”

“Did the Duchess go back to Italy?”

“No, she did not. Never had. She wrote a simple letter to her father, and another one to her betrothed, and she fled with the Count, to live in his old, secluded castle. That’s how I was born. In Lithuania, in the master bedroom of the Lecter Castle. In the exact same room where the spouse of Hannibal the Grim, first of his name, had given birth to their first born. The first noble-born Lecter. Though the Count and the Duchess hadn’t thought about that symbolic, at that time. They had simply thought about the heavy snowfall preventing them from going to a decent hospital. The Count once told me that no one on this Earth had received more insults than the weather did that night.

“In any case, I was born after ten months of pregnancy, and hours of pure agony. The Nanny said to me that I didn’t cry right away. She said I first looked around, as if gauging the room and only then, after being satisfied with my observation, I started to cry. Though, I have to admit I always doubted what the old Ieva had to say about me. She always had a generous proportion to romanticize. The only sure thing about that night is the bad weather, and the fact that I was born.”

“In the bed that welcomed the birth of nobility.”

It was easy to see that in Lecter. An old, outdated sense of aristocracy. Or maybe he was just smug. The Monster had proved numerous times that he didn't need any reason to be what he was.

"Yes. And I was, in the ways that mattered. Or at least, I felt I was. I had no title, but I was loved as a prince. The Count and the Duchess were loved and admired by their neighbors, often regarded as the nobility they weren't anymore."

"Old time's sake?"

"Possibly. But I don't think so. It was more than that. The Count was still called a count, despite it being unthinkable during that period of time. They were regarded as guides and protectors. A position no other noble family had ever been able to restore for themselves. I think the kindness of the Count and the wisdom of the Duchess granted them the nobility time and circumstances had denied them. They were simply… loved. And as their son, I was seen as the son of everyone. All loved me as their blood and protected me as their prince."

"How were you, as a child?"

"I was not who I am today. There is no link, no connection of any sort between me, and the boy that was born in Lithuania so long ago. Only a shared use of the pronoun "I" as a tool to simplify the understanding of our story."

"You were kind and wise too?"

"I was. Far beyond my years. I had a strange, philosophical form of empathy. I don't remember what it felt to be good, but I remember I was. I remember that, back then, it felt natural to be good. As if it was the logical way to behave. Not because I feared punishment, or because I sought reward. But simply because, in the grand scheme of things, that was what made the most sense. My parents would praise me daily for my behavior. I was kind, polite, clever and funny. Reliable in ways children can't be. I would take the greatest care of animals. We had a small number of horses and I would tend to them with all the responsibility of an adult. I remember I would often watch over other children, at the request of their parents, against small coins.

"People naturally trusted me, and for good reasons as I was a trustworthy child. Interacting was natural to me and, growing up among love and safety, I was not shy nor deceitful. I had no reason to be. I would talk to everyone, and laugh with them, sharing their joy as my own. Intellectually, I was advanced. Maybe one of the reasons why I was seen as a caretaker for people my own age."

"How advanced?"

"Far beyond what one could guess. I taught myself how to read before my two years of age, giving quite a fright to the Nanny when she caught me reading with her accent. At six, I met *Euclid's Elements*. One of the two pillars of my intellectual awakening. One afternoon, my father caught me calculating the height of the towers of the castle by measuring their shadow

on the ground. I used a rock of the main ally as gnomon and my yo-yo as plumb bob. I had a fairly precise measure, though I was well aware there was a margin of error between the measurement of a degree every minute because of the rotation of the Earth."

"Of course. The rotation of the Earth."

"Are you mocking me, Will?"

"I am not. If it had been the first thing I had learned about you, I would have been impressed. Now, I know too much for that. On the other hand, I'm happy you never went to an American middle school. They would have bullied the shit out of you."

Hannibal pinched the cords of his lute with an amused smile.

"Maybe they would. And maybe a Lithuanian school would have been the same. But I never went to school. My father thought my abilities needed a fitting frame and company. Two days after I told him what I was doing with my yo-yo, he hired Mr Jakov, a scholar exactly what our current scholars are not: intelligent. I learned a lot, both from his knowledge and from his wisdom. He would never take a book, never quote a name, we would simply talk and discuss and debate. I would ask questions, he would answer; he would ask questions, I would answer. We spent endless afternoons walking the ground around the castle, Mr Jakov using the entire world, from the dust to the clouds, to illustrate his lessons. I already knew kindness, but he tried to teach me warmth, care and tenderness.

"The first time we met, I asked him if he thought he was wasting his time with me. He answered that no one was ever wasting anyone's time. That if someone first appears limited to me, I should have a better look. A deeper look. It made sense to me, at that time. When I think about it, now, I guess he meant we can all learn from others, and everyone has their strengths and riches. Though, all I keep from it, now, is that if someone seems too limited to be worthy of my time, I just have to look from a different angle to find them another worth and purpose. He taught me that the blame of waste weighed only the unimaginative ones. Though I don't think he had in mind the imagination I have now when it comes to waste."

"An imagination you didn't have back then?"

"No. Not for a second."

Some clouds were lazily forming in the sky, carried by the light breezes. Will could see them, in the periphery of his vision, but they seemed far away, and certainly not dense enough to cover the sun.

“Weren’t you lonely, though? School sucks, but it’s still people. You seemed like you were of the extravert type.”

“I was. And no, I wasn’t lonely. Mr Jakov spent every afternoon with me. I had my mother, and my father. The Nanny and the Chef. There were a few children also growing up in the village near our castle, and I would play with them, from time to time, when they didn’t have school. And, the same year I met Mr. Jakov, Mischa was brought into the world. In the middle of summer.”

There was a silence after that. Mischa deserved that much.

Will glanced at Hannibal. His lover had forgotten his instrument, his fingers caressing the cords without producing any sound, his eyes lost in the running water. He could see her. Will had never seen a picture of Mischa, had never heard her description, but he could guess her in his mind.

He was sure she had the exact same eyes as her brother.

“Love at first sight?”

“She looked like an red overgrown squirrel that had been squished for too long and would never find its original shape back.”

Will couldn’t help the laughter that came out of him. Hannibal had said that description with natural and fluidity, as if there was no arguing and those words perfectly described his little sister.

“Understand me, Will, I was deeply disappointed. More than that, offended. It was certainly not what I had envisioned. She was supposed to look like Mother and, well, she had failed on that aspect. I began to wonder if my parents hadn’t missed an important step of the process of creation because, really, something had gone wrong.

“The first few months, when Mother was exhausted, I would offer her to watch over Mischa so she could sleep a bit. She knew full well I was clever and careful, and that I would wake her up at the first cry so she often gladly accepted those offers. I would then always do the same. I would put her in her small cradle and cautiously carry her outside. I would walk across the garden, until a few meters away from the first trees of the forest. I would put her down and lay beside her, feigning deep sleep. And I would wait entire afternoons like that. I thought that it would be convenient if her people of red overgrown squirrels that had been squished for too long were to come back for her, take her during my sleep and bring her back with them, in their world where she wouldn’t be so red and squished anymore.”

“Never happened?”

“For reasons beyond me. And, after some weeks, I had to admit that I felt a love for her. A love so bright I couldn’t possibly deny it any longer. I was eager to see her growth, to discover her voice and her words. I couldn’t wait to be able to show her the world and teach her all the curiosities I had already discovered. Ultimately, I stopped carrying her to the edge of the wood and began singing for her. Waiting not for her to be taken away, but for her to grow up.”

“Was she like you? Was she able to understand everything you wanted to teach her?”

“Not at all. Yet I didn’t love her any less. She was clever in ways I could never be. She had for her an unwavering ability to dream and believe. Her world was filled with wonders already and I soon understood she was not interested in my knowledge but in my imagination. Why would she care about Pythagoras, when I could tell her about the edge of the world? I used her beautiful naivety a lot. We were growing up in a big, empty, sinister castle, with parents increasingly worried for reasons that were beyond us. I guess our home was scary. It had a heavy history, filled with blood and death. Our décor was made of endless shadows, creaking windows, macabre dungeons, and eyeless portraits, and I guess for a normal child, which I wasn’t, there were just too many empty places, too many noises in the night.

“I began to tell her funny stories about the silly ghosts under the roofs, I gave names to her monsters under the bed and taught her how to befriend them, I showed her how to catch fireflies and release them in the oubliettes in order to create wells of dancing lights. I turned every childish fear of hers into new wonders for her to dream about, and she taught me that there was nothing truly scary in this world.

“That was the reason why the flight came as such a world-shattering event for me.”

Will had been wrong about the clouds. They were progressing faster than what he had noticed. It was still a bright, hot Cuban day, but a strange, diluted sourceless shadow had been casted over their world. Which wasn’t so bad, all things considered. Maybe it would rain a bit, and that would dissipate the sticky heat. In any case, Will was now able to fully open his eyes to detail the back of Hannibal, who was sitting just a bit ahead of him. He spread his legs in the sand, his knee cracking after too much time in the same position.

“Still as of today,” resumed Hannibal “I don’t exactly know what it was about. I think my father had been a bit too vocal about his political beliefs. Not so much about communism than about the occupation, and the soviet dictatorship. He had not forget the forced exile, nor the execution of his own father. I knew he advocated for the end of the oppressive soviet rules, and the independence of Lithuania and its people. I also knew he was a voice that was heard among our community, that our neighbors saw him and my mother as wise guides and advisors. And, I guess, in some ways, I had foreseen the flight. Nonetheless, I remember I felt a distinctive tear in my chest the first time I saw fear in my father’s eyes. He woke me up in

the middle of the night, without a word. He put a hand against my mouth so I wouldn't ask any question, and he carried me outside of the room. I still remember the sound of the door being torn off its hinges, the wood cracking and breaking.

"I don't know who those men were. Maybe some form of police. Maybe idealists against bourgeoisie. Or maybe some militants sent by higher-ups to eliminate the threat that people like my parents could represent. I don't know, and it doesn't change much to the story. My father had known that once, that had killed his father, and he knew he couldn't allow that to happen to Mischa and I. So we left that night.

"Hannibal the Grim had built many hidden passages that led outside the castle. Passages that were used during his war, and that were used again that night. We fled in the night. It was the middle of winter, and we knew they couldn't drive their cars through the mountains, with that much snow, so we took the horses and left the castle.

"My father's plan was to reach a cabin we had higher on the mountain, wait there for a couple of weeks, and then travel south to Poland where friends could welcome us and help us to reach France. Father told us about his brother, who he hadn't talk to since the settlement, but who would always welcome us. Who couldn't wait to meet us, Mischa and I. That was his plan, anyway. And it went well only for the first part. We did reach the cabin. But we didn't leave after a few weeks. I did. After a few months."

Hannibal put down his lute on the sand and lazily stretches the muscles of his back that Will could guess under the thin and breathy fabric of his shirt.

The Doctor seemed unbothered. His eyes were focused, his voice light and his breath just as even as it always was. The Empath couldn't sense in him any sense of dread, any fear, any sadness. He was telling the story with detachment. And not a feigned one. Hannibal was telling the story of someone else, maybe one he had read in a book a long time ago and that hadn't impressed him, even the first time around.

No, the sense of dread, of fear and of sadness, it was Will who was starting to experience them. Nothing suffocating, nothing overwhelming. But a looming threat in the shadows of his mind. He wasn't sure he wanted to know all the story anymore. Yet he asked:

"What happened in the cabin?"

Hannibal sighed softly. He enjoyed the breeze in silence for a few seconds, then laid down on the sand, his head reaching Will's spread legs and resting on his thighs. He finally closed his eyes, even though the sun was now shaded to the point of being bearable.

“Six days later, the same that had stormed our castle found the cabin. They asked us to come outside. My father told me to hide with Mischa. They didn’t know there were children. It was the first time I didn’t obey my parents. I hid her but I watched through the window. They executed everyone outside. Then they took my mother’s jewels, which gave me the time to join Mischa. I didn’t want her to die alone. They eventually checked the cabin. But they didn’t think to look under the overturned bathtub. They certainly thought it was too small to hide anyone. They left quickly. It was too cold, even for them.

“Hours later, when we were finally able to get out of hiding, I went outside. I don’t really know what I planned to do, but ultimately, I didn’t do anything. The corpses were too heavy for me. The three nights that followed, we could hear the wolf eating the flesh and the snow outside. So Mischa wouldn’t hear them, I would sing to her every night until the sun rose again. On the fourth night after the death of the Count, the Duchess, the Nanny, the Chef and Mr Jakov, *they* arrived.”

Absentmindedly, Will let his fingers run along the soft hair of Hannibal, playing with it, detailing how the dimmed sun would play with them, revealing some golden reflections.

“They were six. I didn’t know who they were back then. Now, I know their names, but I can’t tell you for sure what they were running away from, just that their flight led them to the same cabin as ours. If their life after the cabin is telling of their life before it, then the crimes that led them to the Lithuanian mountains were numerous in quantity and atrocious in quality.

“Their chef, however, he had a clever mind. We saw that in each other’s eyes right away. In a matter of seconds, he was able to find my weakness, a weakness far greater than my small size or my young age. He used Mischa. As a means to keep me quiet and compliant. He threatened her, and I obeyed him.”

“Why didn’t they kill you? That would have been easier. Or maybe they couldn’t kill children.”

“They very much could. But their chef ordered them to keep us alive. I can only guess his motives, but since he was similar to me in some ways, I think I can guess accurately that he didn’t want to waste us.”

“What good could you be to him?”

“He could sell us. Alive children are worth more than dead ones. When I found him again, years later, he was into human trafficking. Certainly, he had known about that particular brand of business before meeting us.”

“You found him again later? Did you kill him, then?”

“Of course. That much is obvious. But you are far ahead of the story.”

“Sorry. I’m just eager for him to die.”

Hannibal opened one eye and offered Will an amused smile.

“So was I.”

He closed his eyes again.

“So, the cabin,” repeated Will.

“They kept us alive. They chained me like a dog to the wall. They tied the chains around my neck because my wrists were too thin for them. They didn’t bother for Mischa. They knew she couldn’t survive away from me. I was keeping her bond to the wall just as surely as the chains were doing it for me. But we got to stay together. She would never go where I couldn’t reach her. Actually, I’m not sure she left my arm at all right until her death. We thought that, maybe, if we remained very silent, and if we gripped each other hard enough, we could make it alive. But the coldest and hardest months of winter were upon us. The heavy snow turned into a storm. Endless, terrifying storm that raged day and night, making it impossible to even leave the cabin. A cabin that wasn’t furnished to accommodate that many occupants for that many days.”

“The food came to lack.”

Will had finished the idea, seeing clearly where the story was heading.

“It did. After two weeks we were famished. After four, we were desperate.

“I gave everything I had to Mischa. It wasn’t much, but her hunger was more painful to me than mine. Once I didn’t have any food left to offer her, I would feed her stories. I would tell her about that uncle in France, waiting for us. I would tell her he was an artist, and when she asked what that was, I would tell her it was someone capable of making real the images in their head. She would ask me if he could create flying horses. I would say he would craft a herd of them for her, and let them fly freely around the castle. I started detailing everything that she would find in France. I would tell her about the school she would go to, and the friends she would make. I would tell her how the weather was so sweet in the south that we could swim in the ocean in the midst of December. I would tell her that our uncle would teach us how to paint, and that she could finally show me how all her imaginary pets

looked like. And the more my imagination dried out, the more realistic my portraitures got, the more I began to believe them too.

"Then she became ill. The cold, the humidity, the weakness. I can't remember the sound of the guns that killed my parents, but I can remember with vivid precision the sound of her coughs. Deep, wet, painful ones, that would leave her trembling and crying, shaking in absolute silence as to not bring upon us the attention of the men. It seemed like the end of the world, at this time. Her cough sounded like a death knell even if I wouldn't let myself acknowledge that. Now, with the distance that I have, I think her illness was a good thing."

"How so?"

"Because it allowed me to believe for a while that she didn't die because of me."

The sun was still as high as before. And despite the clouds, the heat was still as suffocating. Yet, Will sensed a strange coldness in the pit of his stomach, a misplaced shiver shaking his core. Something was freezing and rotting inside of him.

"At some point, they decided they were just too famished. One of us would have to do. They took off our tops and checked us over. They tested the fat of our cheeks, waist and arms, pinching the skin and feeling the flesh. Thankfully, Mischa coughed, and for a long time, I believed that they ultimately picked her, because she was sick and already dying. Now, I am not so sure."

"The food you gave her…" Will whispered, ignoring the rancid taste at the back of his tongue.

"Yes. She was just a bit less skinny than I was. I had nothing but bones and peeling skin. The food I had given her, that she had been able to eat when I couldn't, had been just enough to keep an elusive memory of her baby fat. So, they logically picked her."

"She… She knew?"

"I don't know. But I knew. And I fought. With everything I had, which was nothing, and still I fought. With my fists, my teeth, everything that could hurt. And for a second, I thought maybe, if I fought enough, I could save her. They were two fully grown adults, and they were unable to take my sister away from me. But a third one came, and I was hit on the head. I fell at once. Ridiculously, compared to the fight that I had put up. The sound of my skull breaking had been stronger than the sound of my sister's screams. Though I heard them both. I always had a keen ear. They brought her outside while she was screaming my name, and they smashed her head with a blunt wood axe.

"I know she was dead because she stopped screaming my name."

A silence settled. One had welcomed Mischa's birth, another one had to mourn her death. Hannibal had opened his eyes at some point during his tale, and Will could see the reflection of the sun in his eyes.

"When I think about that," Hannibal resumed as if following a vague thought, "the only thing that comes to my mind is that she couldn't pronounce the H sound. It was too hard for her. She was only two after all. She died before being able to pronounce my name. I guess it makes me sad, when I think about it. I am not absolutely sure I am sad, but that would be normal to be."

"I am sad about that."

"Good. She deserves for someone to be sad about it."

Will could see Hannibal's hair under his fingers, but it felt as cold and burning as liquid snow against his skin.

"They feed her to you."

It wasn't a question. That much he had guessed.

"That was a reasonable decision. They didn't know how much time they would remain there. If they were there for another month, they needed me to have fattened a bit. But they didn't have any reason to worry. The storm stopped a few days after that, and they quickly left, worried that the authorities that were after them would dare to venture into the mountains, now that the storm had calmed down."

"They didn't kill you?"

"No. I don't know why. I think they didn't have the time to do so. They left hurriedly. I know something happened, for when I went back nearly ten years later, I found the corpse of one of them. But I don't know what happened or if they were attacked. I was suffering from a heavy fever, and my last memory of the cabin was when they fed me Mischa. What I know is that they left, and I was found two days later, walking aimlessly in the woods. It appears that I somehow managed to detach the chain from the wall and walk out of the cabin. I still had it around my neck, though, and when they tried to take it off, most of the skin of my throat went with it. Ultimately, I was left at the nearest orphanage and forgotten."

"Your uncle didn't come for you?"

“He had no reason to think I needed to be searched for.”

Will took a few seconds to breathe deeply. For some awkward reason, he felt nearly relieved that they had left the asphyxiant cabin for a new chapter of the story. For a time, he had nearly felt against his skin the cold, grimy ambiance of that room under the snow, as if himself had been there. Hell, the memory was more vivid to him than it seemed to be to Hannibal.

So he took his time before talking again. The warmth and weight of Hannibal’s head on his thighs chased away the ungraspable coldness that had penetrated his bones. Hiten by a new, more diffuse light, the pool of their courtyard reflected large arches of turquoise rays against the long windows and clear walls of their mansion, clothing it in a shining halo in constant motion. As if the house was breathing a light of its own. Not really a boat in a sea of darkness like the Empath had been used to. More like a lighthouse dominating a peaceful coast. Will wondered if the fireflies Hannibal and Mischa used to free in the oubliettes were as shimmery as their current home. He guessed they certainly had been, at least in the children’s eyes.

“How was it, at the orphanage?”

“It depends on who you ask.”

“I’m asking you.”

“Then, inconsequential would be my answer. The boy I used to be had died somewhere under the snow, and me, the real me… I guess I was busy being given birth to. All my thoughts were walking vain paths at slow paces. As if no one was there to create nor guide them. I wasn’t quite myself yet. I didn’t know what I was… But I know I was something big. Something monstrous.”

“Like Randall Tier?”

“I said monstruous, not bestial. I had no teeth, no claws, no horns, but there was a twist in the depth of my mind. New shadows between the cracks in the wall of my mental palace. Small and persistent snarls that no amount of singing could cover.”

“You noticed right away?”

“I woke up at the orphanage and felt like it was my very few seconds of life. My mind had erased most of the memories I had of the cabin. I knew Mischa was dead, I felt it in the fatality that washed over my first conscious thought, but that was about it. I also knew I was out of this world, and out of this humanity. I stopped talking, and I stopped eating. Even if “stop” isn’t the right word because I felt like I had never even begun. They thought I was mute. Or traumatized. Most certainly both. I wasn’t. I was simply already dead and not born

yet. Somewhere in between. Only living beings need to talk. Only them need to eat. So I did neither. I would simply sit on my bed and wait for something to happen."

"Something happened?"

"Gradually. The orphanage was a violent microcosm. That's what happens when you enclose three hundred children in a place made for fifty. They would fight and no one would stop them. Everything was reason for violence. Food. Blanket. Space. Air. I thought I had led a privileged life and knew nothing of violence. I discovered myself to be actually quite proficient with it. I first didn't know where to hit, but I had the will and the strength to do it anyway. We all spoke the same language and I've always been gifted with linguistics."

"You were a bully?"

"I was the bully of bullies. I didn't care about the other kids. I found them to be either pathetic or forgettable."

"So you hit the strong."

"Yes. Not in a heroic fashion, however. I would receive more beatings in a week than you had in a lifetime. I had the tendency to tackle too strong opponents. But pain had no effect on me. I could feel it, but there was a new depth under my skin, a void that no impact could cross. They soon began to fear me. I was the silent figure who didn't eat, who didn't cry, who didn't talk. One that they couldn't keep down for I would always go back on my feet and stare at them with unchanged eyes. Soon, very few would dare to come near me. Only the oldest and strongest kids because they feared the lost of power more than they feared pain or death."

"You found yourself, ultimately?"

"Not at the orphanage. I sharpened my tools and thickened my skin, but that's about all. I knew something was missing for my awakening. My mind was tricking itself in a vain attempt to abort me. I would only come close to something at night, during my sleep. Mischa would come out of the depths of my mind, and the monster would stir and yawn. Maybe I was haunted by the memory of the cabin, or maybe I was afraid of my own reflection, but I would scream every single night. Now that I'm thinking about it… maybe it was the reason why so many people wanted to see me dead. Less to do with instinctive fright and more to do with nocturnal perturbations…"

"You shared your room with other children, I'm guessing."

"My room? Oh, Will…"

Hannibal seemed very amused by how far off his lover was, but he kept his amusement in check and resumed.

“Picture one large room, with endless rows of bed. One after the other, one above the other. And still, not enough space for everyone. Some would sleep directly on the floor; some would push others in the middle of the night to take their place. All the children, from two to sixteen, crammed together, the youngests calling their moms, the oldests masturbating. During winter, it was a death room. Which I wasn’t too sad about. That meant more space. That meant that the fights for the beds and the blankets would be just a little less frantic, just a little less desperate. Illnesses proliferated at insane rates there. If one coughed during the night, you were sure to find two bodies in the morning. Very few of us could be seen by a doctor. We were too many, and it was cheapest to let us die. They would only send the older ones to the town doctor. The youngers were already doomed.”

“Yet, you survived. How old were you?”

“Nine. And yes, I did survive. For four years before I had to leave.”

“You had to leave?”

“Let say the conflicts had escalated between me and the oldest child in the orphanage. He was a figure of authority, an helper for the director. And he knew he had to show his authority somehow.”

“On you?”

“That was needed. For his survival, at the very least. It ended with a leg lost to a bear trap. Not mine, that is. I knew I couldn’t stay here. I knew I would soon become too big for that orphanage. So I ran. It took me nearly two months to cross Europe from east to west. I climbed the Berlin Wall on the night of my thirteenth birthday. I met my uncle for the first time two weeks later.”

“How… How was it?”

“Short. I passed out from fever and exhaustion before he could end his first sentence. Nevertheless, that must have been enough of a good first impression, for he adopted me.”

Will trailed with his finger the curve of his lover’s eyebrow. Hannibal was focused on the sky, as if he could see some reminiscence from his childhood in the slow whirlwind of the clouds.

“Everything went rather fast, after that. I woke up once again to a new life, this time the monster a bit closer to the skin, but also a bit more satiated. I fell in love with my aunt and in admiration with my uncle. She was a muse, and he was an artist. I learned a bit of humanity from them. Maybe superficial, but a useful tool nonetheless. They tried to send me to school. I was expelled on the second day.”

“You were not playing nice with the other kids?”

“He spit on another child. A younger one. He deserved to lose his jaw. After that, I was homeschooled. She taught me calligraphy, how to compose poems and bouquets, and how to turn papers into prayers for the loved ones. She also taught me how to play the lute, and how to use a sword. Two of my most useful skills. Slowly I talked again, and ate again. I was gradually being born. A few months after my first words, my uncle died of a heart attack during a fight against some animal that had insulted his wife. Later that week, I avenged both the death of my uncle and the honor of my aunt. I ate cheeks for dinner.”

“What did you do with the body?”

“I left it behind. Minus the head. I was not as inspired back then as I am today.”

“And the head?”

“Displayed it on the altar dedicated to the ancestor of Lady Murasaki. As an offering. I had used their weapon after all. I was in debt.”

“And the body? No one found it?”

“Oh, it was found. The very next day. An investigator, just a bit more clever than the others, interrogated me a week later.”

“You left clues behind?”

Will had trouble believing that, used as he was to Hannibal’s perfect methodology. He couldn’t quite picture a younger, more chaotic monster than the one he had learned to know.

“I left plenty. I simply didn’t have it in me to care. Prison, death, it all seemed the same to me. And, I had a lot of fun, being questioned by the police. Pascal Popil was a very funny man.”

“He truly suspected you?”

“Oh, he knew. He was certain. But he didn’t have enough to arrest me. So, he eventually let me go.”

“And your aunt?”

“She knew too. But she could still see the phantom of the boy I used to be among the youthful features of my face, and she loved me more than it was wise to. So she protected me, and continued to nurture me.”

“That is a situation I can empathize with.”

“You feed from me just as much as I feed from you, Will.”

Will smiled. He knew it was an accurate description of their dynamic, and he found it beautiful in its own, poetic, twisted way.

"At fourteen," resumed Hannibal, "I entered the Université Paris Descartes, to study medicine, thanks to some anatomical drawings that had caught high-placed interests. Lady Murasaki moved to Paris too after the loss of our house following my uncle's death. Yet she insisted on renting me my own apartment. I think she wasn't at ease in my presence anymore. I was less and less a boy, and more and more a man. Chiyoh stayed with her as I moved into a small room above the faculty. Studies absorbed me completely. I would spend my days in the labs, and, at night, I would draw the faces in my dream with black ink on paper and hang them on the wall. Both my days and my nights were dedicated to research, either about human anatomy or about the anatomy of my own self.

"I was the youngest student ever admitted to that university. Everyone was telling me how proud my parents would be. Some even went as far as to say they were watching me from up there. Which I always found funny. If they were indeed watching, proud would be low on the list of their thoughts about me. But, by that time I already knew how to dress in human clothes, and I never laughed when something like that had been said to me. Despite how funny the idea was."

"I see you already had a strong sense of humor," noted Will, very unamused. "So you became a doctor and the perfect son. When did you kill the bastards who killed Mischa?"

"Be patient, my dear heart, it's coming."

Will had hundreds of questions. Had he found them all? How much had they suffered? Did they understand what was coming and why? What happened to the bodies? Yet, he quieted his curiosity and let Hannibal resume at his own, agonizingly slow rhythm. Had he suspected that telling the story was an ordeal, he wouldn't have been so harsh on his lover. After all, those were painful memories. But Hannibal wasn't in pain. He wasn't struggling. He was simply narrating, and his slow pace was only justified by the pleasure he found in Will's frustration.

"At seventeen, a new meeting changed the course of my efforts to remember what haunted my dreams."

"A meeting with who?"

"With what. Sodic thiopental."

"Sodic thiopental?"

“And some other substances.”

“You mean narcotics?”

“I mean hypnotic chemicals. Good to disentangle the tongues. Or the minds.”

“You drugged yourself?”

Hannibal looked around, thought for a couple of second, and finally:

“I did. To major results. I was able to remember the cabin. How to get there. I was able to remember Mischa.”

“And the men?”

“They were all over the walls of my rooms. But yes, I saw them too. Clearly. The next day, I was on the train for Vilnius. Near the castle, I found one of our horses. He had found the way back home on his own. He was old and nearly dead, but he carried me through the mountains. The memories were useless, as he knew the path to the cabin too. I found it in ruins. With the body of one of them, perfectly preserved under the snow. The wolves hadn’t eaten him, which I found to be infuriatingly unfair.”

“And Mischa?”

“Her bones. Chewed to the core.”

“You buried her?”

“Not right away. First I killed. My arrival in Lithuania had not been missed, especially since one of the men I was after was now working as a border guard. He waited for me to be alone on the mountain. And he attacked me. I killed him then ate his cheeks with wild mushroom roasted on a spite. Not before he told me the names of the four remaining men. Petras Kolnas. Bronis Grentz. Zigmas Milko. And their chef, Vladis Grutas.”

He detached each of those names with a distant smile. It wasn’t a happy one, nor a tender one. There was a sarcasm hidden under the curves of the Monster’s lips. As if, by remembering those names, Hannibal couldn’t help but dwell on the irony of life. And he loved very few things more than he loved irony and twisted justice.

“I killed him. Well, more exactly the horse killed him, but that’s an inconsequential aside. Once he was dead and digested, I left his body on the snow and climbed higher on the mountain to bury Mischa.”

His eyes and smile remained undisturbed, but Will could catch a vague distance in his voice, a buried echo barely audible.

“Mischa always loved winters. She once said that her two favorite things arrived during winter. Me, and snow. But she was so sensitive to cold… She would try to grab snow with her baby hands, and start to cry at the second it touched her skin. She loved snow angels but never dared to lay on the snow, so she would always ask me to do them for her. Over and over. And, of course, I would always indulge her and never come home before she was laughing with joy loudly enough to be heard in the entire castle.”

His eyes fell back on Will, and the echo disappeared, replaced by the warmth of casual conversation.

“I climbed as high as I could in one night, and buried her on a peak. Where she would be enveloped by eternal snows, now that she had no skin left to feel the cold.”

Will took a breath but Hannibal stopped him right away.

“Don’t.”

“What?”

“You were about to say that she would have loved it.”

“No,” lied Will.

“She would have loved to be alive, Will. Not to be buried in a nice spot with a good view.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be, I’m glad she is dead.”

For a second, Will tried to find provocation, irony or even lie on the face of the Monster. He found none.

“Why?”

“Because the world is unworthy of her. It couldn’t accommodate someone like her, and she shouldn’t have to suffer its insult. And I am glad there is no paradise. Because she deserved more than to serve a cruel, childish god. Nonexistence blessed her as a cure, for nothing in this existence was enough for her. Had she survived instead of me, had she been twisted instead of me, humanity would have cowered on itself and died in a rale.”

Yeah, that seemed about right, Will thought. A beacon could be lost, it could be extinguished, but if it were to be twisted, it was the whole world that would go astray.

“Then?”

“Then I went back to France. Found the other men. Killed Milko and Kolnas. Lady Murasaki tried to convince me to stop my revenge, but it was too late. I chose it over her when I ate the face of Vladis Grutas in front of her. She left, and I was finally wholly and irreversibly brought to the world. I was born under the Lithuanian snow, but took my first breath at eighteen, a breath of air and blood. I laid my dead sister and my dead self under the dust, and I took complete possession of my mind and body, shaped exactly as the figure you know today.

“I stopped dreaming at night, after that. I left France and the bodies behind and joined a residency at John Hopkins. I became a surgeon, until death insulted me beyond what could be forgiven, by unfairly taking a patient that I had the skills and knowledge to save. I realized that I didn’t wish to play against an opponent that would cheat so openly, so I quitted surgery and became a psychiatrist. You know the rest.”

“What about Grentz?”

“I killed him too. But without anger, and without need. I killed him because I could. Because I was on winter vacation and because killing him was more entertaining than going skiing. As I said, Will. My meaning doesn’t lay somewhere between my roots. What happened to Mischa, what happened to me, it doesn't make sense of what I am. I do what I do not because I am hurt, or damaged or haunted. I am neither. I do what I do because I can. And because I like it just as much as I like going to the Opera or buying a new coat.”

“I know, Hannibal. As I said. I was not asking for your meaning, simply for your story.”

“Satisfied?”

“Unsure of what I am. Satisfaction… No. But I don’t have any questions left.”

“We should go home now. The clouds are not going anywhere, and the rain is close.”

“Go ahead. I’ll stay here for a bit.”

Hannibal hesitated but finally nodded. He knew Will needed time to mourn, and the fact that he never had what he had lost didn't lessen the honesty of his latent sadness.

Will didn't learn about Hannibal, that day. But he learned about a boy that could have lived and thrived, had the world been just a little less cruel.

Later, far later, he asked to go to Lithuania. Hannibal laughed it off, and Will left during the night, with only a note to say he would be back in three days.

Once back to the Lecter castle, he walked from the forest to the mountain. The cabin was not hard to find when no blizzard hid it from the world. It was summer, and the sheet of snow covering the ground could do little more than reflect the grey sun over his head.

He didn't enter the cabin. He wasn't sure he could stomach it. And he was even less sure that he could get out of it without dragging despair and horror with him, stuck to his skin. No, instead, he looked for Mischa's grave. The real one. Not the corpseless one that had been made for her in the Lecter cemetery.

Instinctively, or maybe empathically, he followed the exact footsteps of Hannibal, only years separating their presences. He found it after a night of climbing. A bit less than a night, for Hannibal had still been quite small when he had walked the same path.

Mischa's grave was nothing like what she deserved. It was a bump of snow between the roots of a secular tree. A part of the trunk had been carved to create a smooth surface, on which her first name was engraved. No cross, no flower, no mention of loving relatives. No marble and no statute of crying angels. Nothing but bones under the snow, and a name on a tree.

Will knelt by her side, and shed the tears her brother would have, if he had survived her. He didn't know exactly for whom he cried. For Mischa, for Hannibal, or for himself. But he did until the sun rose again.

When he arrived back to Cuba, it was the night again, and he silently slipped under the covers of their shared bed. He didn't say a word, but he didn't hesitate to embrace Hannibal either. He knew the man was awake.

"What did you do?"

"I buried a friend," Will answered.

“I am sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you.”

“It was not my aim to burden you in that way.”

“You did not, Hannibal. I am glad I have been able to meet her.”

“Yet to lose her a second later.”

“She is worth the pain and the ordeal. Just like you.”

Hannibal softly kissed Will’s lips. It was a strange concept, to be known and seen so completely. But Will never had to snatch anything from him for Hannibal to want to offer him his entire world.

End Notes

What comes from where:

The parents' titles: book + movie
Their meeting: historical recontextualization
Hannibal's childhood in the castle: book
The attack during the night: recontextualization inspired by the book
The parents' death: recontextualization inspired by the book
The cabin: movie + book
The orphanage: movie + book + tv show (and a bit of dramatization by yours truly)
From Lithuania to France : I took his travel from the movie, but his uncle being alive from the book. His age when he was adopted is taken from the book, contradicting the 16 yo mentionned in the TVshow.
Hannibal's life in France : book + movie
Hannibal's admission to Uni: a wild guess. Book and TV show tells us his drawings granted him entry. In the movie, it is stated he is the youngest student in medecine. I checked, that would be 12 years old. But he would still be at the orphanage at that time. So I changed it up for the youngest admitted in that Uni. In the book, he is around 16, but 16, though it is impressive, it is not Hannibal Level of impressing. In the book, he is between 14 and 18. It is not stated for sure. So I took 14. Hannibal Level of impressing being needed.
Hannibal's journey to LIthuania: Book + movie
Hannibal's departure to the US: Book
His career after that: TV show

Here is the short version of everything. I sometime had to adapt and, for small details, I just did what I thought was the more interesting.

Anyway, let me know what you thought of it! And if you have personal headcanons about Hannibal, I'm genuinly interested. I am, for myself, unable to imagine his childhood differently for what I've read in the book.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!